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STRATEGIC OBJECTIVE #12 (SO12)

(Conflict Reduced in Mindanao and Other Areas Vulnerable to Violence)

High-value vegetables uplift lives of former rebels

(Source: Business World Internet Edition – 9/15/05)

Polomolok, South Cotabato -- By growing high-value vegetables, former Moro National Liberation Front combatants have transformed Barangay Sumbakil here from a rebel stronghold into a peace and development zone.

As a result of substituting shovels for firearms, the children of these former rebels have attended school -- their lives better now than before.

Kakim Zarudin, a former rebel commander, heads a cooperative of former rebels that has been focusing on planting high value vegetables in the last two years.

Close to 80 former rebels and their children composed the Mapia Multipurpose Cooperative that has ventured into growing tomato, bell peppers, squash, eggplant, cucumber, *ampalaya* (bitter gourd), string beans, *patola* and *upo* in about 3.5 hectares of scattered land in this remote village dominated by Muslims.

"Money in vegetable growing is faster than in corn production. In my case, I can deliver vegetable products thrice a week to the market," said Mr. Zarudin, surveying his 1.5-hectare vegetable farm. Compared with corn, which could be harvested from three to four months from planting, Mr. Zarudin said the earliest they could turn their vegetables into profit is only 48 days.

He added that unlike corn, vegetables like bell peppers, cucumber, eggplant, to name just a few, do not end after one harvest but could continuously yield thereafter for several months.

The Mapia cooperative was introduced to high-value vegetables by the Growth with Equity Program, a United States Agency for International Development-funded initiative in Mindanao.

Arcadio Rodulfa, Jr., the project's agriculture specialist, said they are targeting to teach at least 7,000 former rebels the value of vegetable growing.

"We don't want them to take up arms again so we are teaching them the means to live decent lives through vegetable growing," he told *BusinessWorld*. Mr. Zarudin affirmed, "It is difficult to live with guns in the mountains."

Mr. Rodulfa noted that the target 7,000 former rebels form part of the 28,000 ex-guerillas who have benefited from an earlier program.

Members of the Mapia cooperative, three years after MNLF founder Nur Misuari signed a peace pact with the government on Sept. 2, 1996, were given corn seeds, a warehouse, solar dryer, sheller during the first phase of the program, said Mr. Zarudin.

"It was only in 2003 that we were introduced to high-value vegetables. The cooperative has no remorse of adopting it because it has contributed to our growth," he noted.

Mr. Zarudin said the cooperative bought its own hauler truck following the members' decision to plant vegetable, which they sold in the town's market and in nearby places.

Lately, he added that buyers outside of Mindanao are seeking their vegetable product, particularly tomato.

Mr. Rodulfa said the cooperative has become stronger after becoming a member of the Vegetable Industry Council of Southern Mindanao. "The council helps them link with prospective buyers," he added.

With P60 contribution per member when the cooperative was organized in 1999, Mr. Zarudin said their group is now worth more than P1 million.

The cooperative earns by lending money to the members at 5% interest rate payable within five months, he said.

Vegetable sales of individual cooperative members, when combined, have increased to P4 million from P1 million since the project was introduced in 2003, a program estimate said.

The high-value vegetable thrust is bringing new opportunities to the cooperative. Mr. Zarudin told *BusinessWorld* that giant pineapple firm Dole now wants the cooperative to supply the company's employees with vegetables like broccoli, lettuce, cauliflower and cucumber.

This after the company reportedly discovered that many of its workers have heart problems due to eating high-cholesterol meat products.

"Dole is willing to give the cooperative a small space in the cannery where we can sell the vegetables of the members to the employees. We are still discussing how to carry this out," Mr. Zarudin said.

He added that he entered the rebel movement when he was only 11 years old.

Now at 41, Mr. Zarudin expressed optimism that the cooperative could sustain the economic momentum of the members, their lives becoming better by the day by planting high-value vegetable crops. -- **Romer S. Sarmiento**